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Spanish for foreign trade

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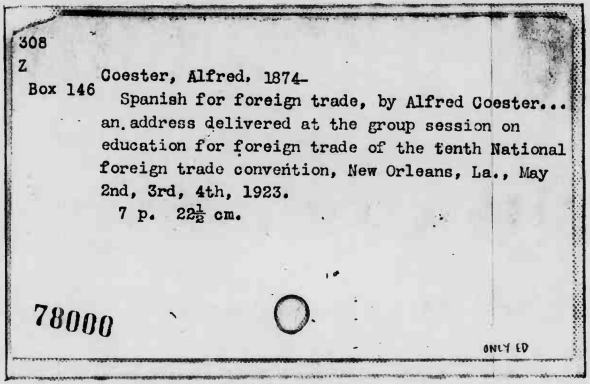

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SPANISH
for FOREIGN TRADE

By ALFRED COESTER

Assistant Professor of Spanish, Stanford University;
Secretary-Treasurer, American Association
of Teachers of Spanish

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An address delivered at the group session on Education for Foreign Trade of the Tenth National Foreign Trade Convention, New Orleans, La., May 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 1923.

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SPANISH FOR FOREIGN TRADE

By ALFRED COESTER,

Assistant Professor of Spanish, Stanford University, and Secy.-Treas., American Assn. of Teachers of Spanish

How much business would you do with an old skinflint whom you hated? And if you were persuaded that this individual was trying to get your father into debt so that he could sieze the old home farm and add it to his grand estate, would you lend a willing ear to his salesmen? I imagine you would kick them out of your place of business and invite in his competitors. A situation like this confronts North American salesmen in Spanish America and complicates the question of teaching Spanish for foreign trade in our schools and colleges.

Commerce is often considered by Latin-Americans in the light of a personal relationship between buyer and seller, as an opportunity for the interchange of friendly acts. This notion is probably a part of the Spanish inheritance from Moorish ancestors, for you meet it now in its most elementary form in dealing with Moors. I once wished to buy a pair of Moorish slippers costing a shilling from a small bazaar in Gibraltar. Before the sale was completed, it was necessary for me to smoke a cigarette and drink a cup of coffee with the old Moor who owned the establishment. Another instance of the same basic conception of commerce happened not long ago in Mexico. A landed proprietor decided to install some sugar-making machinery on his estate. He invited representatives from seven North American houses to visit him. After entertaining them all for a week, he gave his order—to the man making the lowest bid? No, indeed; but to the salesman who made himself socially the most agreeable.

In teaching Spanish, then, to prospective foreign traders, whether they expect to do business on their own account or to be foreign correspondents, I believe it necessary to instruct them in the psychology of their possible customers.

At present this problem is complicated by the suspicion with which Latin-Americans regard Uncle Sam. There are some among

them who are making a living by lecturing on his iniquities as a money lender and asserting that the doctrine of Pan Americanism means "America for North Americans." They write books with such pompous titles as, "My campaign for Latin America" in which the United States is called the "great wolf of the north." In Central America periodicals are printing answers to a questionnaire as to what sort of union can be formed of Latin-American peoples to meet the menace of the United States. The proponents of a "Latin-American Union" use the term "peoples" to distinguish the citizens of a greater Latin America without reference to nationality because they believe the governments of the different countries are now held in a strangle hold by North American capital.

Such a mental attitude cannot be changed over night. The individual trader must labor against it as best he may. But I do believe that a widespread study of Spanish in the high schools and colleges of the United States would effect a great change. If Spanish were a compulsory study in every high school in the country, the time would not be far distant when an intelligent body of public opinion would be formed, acquainted with things Latin-American and in sympathy with Latin-American conditions. This educated public opinion would have such an immense influence on our governmental dealings with Latin America that it would bring about a better feeling toward us and our salesmen who offer goods in those countries to the south.

That Spanish is necessary for traders in Spanish America is of course a truism. I could spend some time relating instances from my own experience in Argentina when investigating the varying success of North American exporters according as they did or did not use Spanish on their labels and in the directions accompanying their goods as well as in such an important thing as the trade mark on their merchandise.

When we consider the teaching of Spanish in our high schools, this truism is an element both of strength and of weakness. Some critics opposed to any increase in the study of Spanish admit that commercial advantage may be derived from a knowledge of the language, but superciliously inquire how many pupils in the Spanish classes will ever make a commercial use of the language. The answer to such criticism is that the percentage of boys and girls now studying Spanish who will some day make a commercial use of it has nothing to do with the question of value. The desirability of more Spanish in our high schools is determined by a consideration of great

moment. Every student of Spanish is receiving valuable training in an international point of view.

The importance of the international point of view and its place in training for foreign trade have been discussed at previous foreign trade conventions. At Cleveland a speaker said, "The most vital problem, the one most difficult of solution, is how shall we impart to our young people an appreciation of social and economic conditions in other countries—an international point of view." Another speaker indicated a solution of the problem, "through proper education in the schools," and urged the study of geography and economics by such a method as to inculcate an international point of view. At Philadelphia again was emphasized the importance of educating our young people to " a sympathetic understanding and appreciation of foreign nations."

For this purpose no study can possibly equal that of foreign languages. And a little reflection will make clear that next to English, Spanish is the most important language on this continent of America, the continent of the immediate future.

Passing now to a consideration of some of the practical problems in teaching Spanish, we find that the first step in learning a language and the one which in reality presents the greatest difficulty is to acquire a vocabulary. In psychological terms acquiring a vocabulary means the association of verbal symbols with physical objects and the actions of men and beasts. A child requires a long time to make these associations in his mother tongue and to coordinate them into really coherent speech. The learning of a foreign language involves the association of a second set of verbal symbols or words with the same objects and acts. Generally the second set of words is not associated directly with the phenomena but with the first set, that is, the foreign word is associated with the vernacular word. Now this acquisition of two diverse verbal symbols for the same thing is so difficult that poor linguists never accomplish it.

A more complex and subtle association is that between the words of a language and its structure or syntax. Hence one may possess a good vocabulary in a foreign tongue and yet not speak it idiomatically. Speaking is, of course, more difficult than reading, which in turn is easier than writing. Speaking is the most difficult because, being done at a more rapid rate, it must proceed from the direct association of verbal symbol and idea; whereas reading and writing can be carried on by means of the association of the foreign word and the vernacular.

It is thus possible for a man to read and write a foreign language with considerable accuracy without being able to speak it intelligently. Yet the teacher would be very foolish who excluded the spoken word from the classroom. That point need not be discussed here. Rather we should consider how a teacher of commercial Spanish can impart a knowledge of the highly technical vocabulary of commercial Spanish.

The subject is so broad that classroom work must necessarily be limited. On one hand it is plain that not all the special terms used in every branch of manufacturing or line of trade can be taken up there. On the other hand it is obvious that all foreign correspondence will need the words applicable to bookkeeping and referring to the various documents requisite in foreign trade, such as bills of lading, invoices, insurance policies and drafts.

The question then arises, is it sufficient that students know the Spanish words by which to translate the terms ledger, debit balance, credit your account, cash a draft, etc., without knowing what sort of accounts are kept in a ledger, what the difference is between debit and credit, and what sort of document a draft is? I think not. A thoroughly competent foreign correspondent ought perhaps to be a graduate of a commercial school where he has acquired elementary notions of bookkeeping and commercial documents. Courses in commercial Spanish, however both in high schools and colleges, are sure to have in them students who know nothing of such studies. Their very ignorance may prove a blessing because it gives the teacher an opportunity so to frame his instruction that the student associates directly the word and the thing. The teacher, for example, may make his lesson on the terms of bookkeeping a lesson in elementary bookkeeping, explaining by actual example the arrangement of accounts in debit and credit columns. When words referring to bills of exchange are taken up, real or facsimile drafts can be handled. In the same way all commercial documents can be studied.

The approach to the study of commercial Spanish is usually made through business correspondence. The pupil reads a few selected letters. His attention is directed to the proper way of opening and closing them; and he learns a few stereotyped phrases. Then he is prepared, in some people's opinion, to sail into commercial correspondence. His first letter, however, written independently of the textbook, reveals the most deplorable ignorance of grammar and idiom. Often he cannot spell the names of the days of the week nor that of the month of January. If required to express the dimensions of an object, he flounders hopelessly. The subjunctive mood, so essential in framing requests, he has heard of perhaps. These defects in grammatical knowledge were well known to the authors of a certain textbook on commercial Spanish correspondence, for they attempt to give a full review of grammar in the form of footnotes. This is helpful, but Spanish grammar cannot be thoroughly taught in so summary a fashion.

This ignorance, so common among pupils in a class of commercial Spanish, springs from two sources: one, the notion that Spanish commercial correspondence is easy; the other, the impatience of somebody, be he a school principal or a parent, that the boy study something practical instead of "literature," as I have heard miscalled the stories used in intermediate classes. The need for much reading of stories and drill on colloquial idiom is based on the fact that the language of commerce is closely interwoven with the vocabulary of every-day life.

This fact will develop very plainly when the prospective foreign correspondent is asked to write a circular letter or an advertisement. Writing advertisements, to be sure, is an art; and in actual business will probably be left to the expert in the employ of the house. The ad man is supposed to write with punch; but, unless he consults the foreign correspondent, some of his most telling strokes are likely to be ridiculous in Spanish. The foreign correspondent, in his capacity of an expert in Spanish psychology, can indicate what pitfalls to avoid. The foreign correspondent, anyhow, should not be reduced to the status of a mere translator, but should be capable of composing circulars, follow-up letters and advertisements. The basic notion of the art can be taught in connection with a course in commercial Spanish. As a teaching device, I can assure you, it repays the effort with compound interest.

Correct colloquial idiom, so essential even in commercial correspondence, is taught most easily to the young. The youthful mind forms the required associations with less effort and balks less at the constant repetition necessary to memorize the foreign idiom. Therefore the study of Spanish may well be taken up in the last years of the grammar grades or what is now called the junior high school. Immediately the proponent of this idea will be opposed by the sort of person who thinks too much money is already being spent on education, that the way

to spend less is to omit what he calls "fads and frills"; among which he classes the study of a foreign language, because he himself is interested in some other subject. If he is in a position of authority, where he can enforce his opinion, he is likely to put Spanish out even of the high school, or at best allow it insufficient time with a poorly paid teacher on the theory that only a reading knowledge of the language is necessary. Usually this sort of person is not himself acquainted with a foreign language and does not understand that his so-called reading knowledge is best obtained by much oral use of Spanish in the classroom.

Oral practice of a language in the classroom, sometimes ignorantly opposed on the ground that a school cannot teach pupils to speak a foreign language, does require time and a liberal allowance of money for well-prepared teachers. I have read criticisms by business men of the way languages are taught. They think too much reading and translation is done and not enough oral use made of the language. If these critics had investigated, I am sure they would have found the ultimate reason to be that which I have outlined, a person in authority who grudged money for teaching Spanish.

Let me assure this audience that the fifteen hundred members of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish, which I represent here, stand for as much oral Spanish in the classroom as possible, just as much as any community will pay for. This Association further believes that in view of the relation, ever growing closer and more complex, between the Spanish and English languages on this continent, that the teaching of Spanish in the United States is a patriotic duty.

The foregoing discussion should have made plain that to carry on an ideal course in commercial Spanish the student must bring to it adequate preparation. I refer to a preparation which comprises not merely a sufficient preliminary study of the Spanish language itself, but one in which other studies make up a co-ordinated whole. The greatest evil in American education to-day is the lack of co-ordination between studies. The nearest approach to the ideal course at present will be found in a commercial high school in which all pupils have studied bookkeeping and stenography. In the foreign language class, stenography holds helpful possibilities, undreamed of by the instructor who has never had the privilege of teaching a group

of students who were able to write shorthand. Moreover, the foreign language instructor himself need know nothing of the art beyond its most elementary principles. Any high school course, however, falls short of being ideal because even the oldest pupils lack the maturity of mind that comes with college age and enables them to grasp the principles of such allied topics as economics and business law. The ideal course, in my opinion, demands three things of the student, adequate preparation, co-ordination of studies, and maturity of mind.

Struggling with students' limitations in preparation is, to be sure, the task of teachers everywhere. As an advocate of the most widespread teaching of Spanish in the United States, I acknowledge the fact, but I do not confine my aspirations to a desire merely to train a few expert correspondents. I believe that every boy and girl that is taught even a little Spanish marks a gain toward a better understanding of Spanish-speaking countries and hence toward better trade relations between them and the United States.

The relation between the study of Spanish in the United States and our foreign trade, as I have tried to set forth in this paper, may be summed up in a series of propositions:

1. Our foreign trade will be better if a larger number of our people have been trained to think in international terms.

2. The study of Spanish will train many minds to think in international terms.

3. Spanish is the key to a constantly growing market for our goods.

4. This market is not in a very receptive attitude toward us because in the past administrative action at Washington was not influenced by public opinion acquainted with Spanish-American conditions.

5. The study of Spanish will create a body of public opinion in sympathy with Spanish America.

6. This intelligent public opinion will be reflected by a different attitude on the part of future administrations at Washington, which change will eventually modify the attitude of the Spanish-speaking countries toward ourselves.

7. The citizen who by his influence encourages and assists the study of Spanish in his own local high school is effecting two things: he is helping to boost our foreign trade and HE IS PERFORMING A PATRIOTIC SERVICE.

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